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TOWARDS AN ETYMOLOGY OF MAORI *WAITOREKE*

JOHN BECKER
P.O. Box 60, Brooktondale, New York 14817, U.S.A.

ABSTRACT: A supposed New Zealand otter-like animal was known to the Maori as *waitoreke*. The meaning of this term is thought to derive from *wai*, "water." A number of alternate meanings, linking the animal with the mythological fauna of the Maori, are presented and shown to be equally, if not more, plausible. Another name for the animal, *kaureke*, is also examined.

INTRODUCTION

The rarity and infrequent sightings of an animal known to the Maori as *waitoreke* have left investigators little to go on. After gathering the most complete collection of evidence concerning this "otter," Watson (1960) came to the view that "there is very little ground for any belief in the animal's existence."

According to Watson's sources, the first European sighting of the *waitoreke* was in May of 1773 by some of the members of the *Resolution*'s crew; the *kaureke*—of which more later—was first seen by whites in 1844, four years before Mantell heard of it. It is thought that both names refer to the same animal, a jackal- or fox-like quadruped, about two feet long from the nose to the root of its bushy tail. Its head is said to look like a compromise between a dog and a cat. Its legs are short and thick. The fur is a grizzly brown or mouse color. There are apparently two forms: a terrestrial variety, which lives in a burrow and eats lizards, and an aquatic, fish-eating form, which lives in a beaveresque house it builds along lakes and streams. These houses are said to have one opening above the surface and another below. The house sometimes floats freely. The *waitoreke* is active at dawn and dusk. When frightened, it emits a scream and gives off a strong, musky odor. The tracks are said to resemble those of the European otter, although the toes are not webbed. Details of its morphology are unclear and even contradictory. According to the same sources, one native account stated it lays duck-sized eggs, while another stated it did *not* lay eggs, but neither did it have a pouch. Natives also claimed they were kept as pets in olden times.

When he took into consideration the evidence of the reports, along with the unlikelihood of either trans-oceanic dispersal or a Cretaceous land bridge from Australia to account for the quadruped's presence in New Zealand, Watson came to his negative conclusion with only the slighest reservations. Since the etymological evidence presented by Watson and also by Ley (1959) was quite brief, this paper assembles the available linguistic data concerning the *waitoreke*.

NAMING PROCESSES

Processes of naming animals are quite complex, but we can point to several general techniques: 1) An animal that is well-known to a population has a name in the native language, although the etymology often is unknown even to native speakers, e.g., "horse." 2) An animal introduced by foreigners usually retains the foreign name, e.g., *zebra.* 3) An animal is entirely new and is undesignated in both native and foreign speech. In this case, the process begins when the speaker describes the encounter to someone else, and this continues until a descriptive neologism is coined to refer to the more lengthy narrative, e.g., "French moose," a Canadian Indian term for horse. If the encounters are repeated, concensus refines the neologism. When encounters are rare, several names may develop. 4) With well-known creatures, an allegorical name can arise, but this is usually in addition to its primary name, e.g., "man's best friend," "ship of the desert."

With these considerations in mind, an etymology of *waitoreke* should reveal information about the speaker's relationship with, or impression of, the animal. Due to the animal's rarity—both in the wild and in print—allegorical naming, 4) above, can be ruled out.

Observing the characteristics of Maori will facilitate judging whether or not *waitoreke* has been borrowed from another language. The phonetic repertoire—those elementary sounds of speech—is quite limited in Maori. Only fifteen are employed (*a, e, i, o, u, h, k, m, n, ng, p, r, t, w, wh*), and a restricted number of phonemic patterns are available (Krupa 1966). Since no word can end in a consonant, clusters of consonants are not allowed, and no consonant can occur by itself; the permissible word canons are either mono-vocalic (CV or V), bi-vocalic (CVCV, VCV, CVV, or VV), or poly-vocalic (CVCVCV, VCVCV, CVCVV, or VVV). There are also some further constraints on possible phoneme sequences (Biggs 1961) which need not trouble us here.

The necessary phonetic alterations a borrowed word may undergo, depends primarily upon how well the original word maps onto the Maori phonetic system. Only orthography may change, i.e., no phonetic change (*kau* "cow"), a final vowel may be added (*kuri* "cur, dog"; *kawhe* "calf"), a consonant cluster avoided (*maki* "monkey," cf. Malagasy *maki* = *Lemur catta*), or some combination of these changes employed (*poaka* "pig, pork"—not *poroka* which means "frog"). When there is no Maori equivalent, allophones are used (*raiona* "lion"; *tia* "deer," cf. *pia* "beer"), or the same Maori phoneme is used for a class of foreign sounds, e.g., *h* for all fricatives except *f* (*hipi* "sheep").

Since no plausible foreign word has been suggested to account for *waitoreke,* and in view of the morphemic compatibility of the word and the Maori language evident from the dictionaries (Savage 1962, Williams 1971),

we must assume that we are working with an established Maori word or a recent neologism constructed on Maori grammatical patterns.

A very limited number of words for mammals betray any true Maori origins. The term for "dog," *kararehe,* is really just a more general term for "animal" or "beast"; *ngeru* "cat" is, however, of Polynesian origin. Treager (1891) suggests that it is perhaps a modern or foreign word. Considering Samoan *geli* "cat," Tongan *geli* "a monkey," and Tahitian *eru* "scratch," it seems likely that, in this instance, the Maori morphemes were at work rather than borrowing. The word is native, even if the animal is not. Among land mammals, the only ones native to the Austronesian environment are the *kiore* "rat" (cf. Hawaiian *kiole*), and the *pekapeka* "bat"; *kiore paku* "little rat, mouse" is modern. A number of names for whales and porpoises are native: *pakake* (the Minke whale, *Balaenoptera acutorostrata*), *tohora* (a right whale subspecies, *Balaena glacialis australis*), *paraoa* (the sperm whale, *Physeter macrocephalus*), and *wai-aua* (Hector's dolphin, *Cephalorhynchus hectori*).

The Maori awareness of animals was quite different than that of most modern non-Polynesian cultures. Animals we might consider very different could be called by the same name; *ngarara* means "an insect" and also "a reptile"—one of which was considered mythical (McLintock 1966). There is also a Polynesian tendency to use cognate or similar terms for shaggy or broken surfaces. For instance, *huruhuru* is equally valid for "feathers" or "hair." There are, certainly, similar situations in other languages; for example, the medieval English "vermin" referred to everything that crept or crawled, in the sense that many persons today use the term "creepy-crawly." There is the possibility that this "hair/feathers/scales" equality has significantly clouded the issue.

The Roots of *Waitoreke*

Turning more specifically to *waitoreke,* we can begin as Ley (1959) and Watson (1960) did by examining the likelihood that the meaning somehow derives from *wai,* the general term for "water."

There are, in fact, a number of water creatures whose names are in all probability derived from *wai* "water." These include *ha-wai,* the term for a kind of fish, "the black kokopu" (*Galaxias alepidotus*), "a bullhead" (*Gobiomorphus gobiodies*), or "an edible tree fungus"; *wai-keo* or *wai-ehu* "a kind of fish"; *wai-kaka* "mudfish" (*Neochanna apoda*); *wai-ngenge* "a kind of shark"; *wai-whakaiho* "a small crab used as shark bait"; and the aforementioned *wai-aua* "porpoise."

The meaning "water" is evident in an abundance of other terms. These include those which refer to bodies of water (*waipeka* "branching water," *wairoto* "enclosed water, lake," *waiariki* "hot spring, pool," *hawai* "water course, rivulet, shallows of a lagoon or swamp," *waipuke* "flood"); kinds of water (*waitai* "saltwater," *wai maori* "fresh water," *wai reka* "sweet drink," *wai piro* "strong drink"); and the action of water or its results (*moo-wai* "to become wet," *kuu-wai-wai* "wet," *a-wai* "heavy, sodden," *waikura* "[to] rust").

This root is also frequently used in place names, such as *waipounamu* "Greenstone Waters," and *hawaiki-pumamao* "Traditional Homeland of the Maori." A very probable usage of the *wai* morpheme is found in *waiu* "milk." Still others indicate possible connection: *puwai* "flower, blossom," *waimarie* "luck, fortune," *waia* "be accustomed," *waihanga* "to build." A seemingly likely candidate, *waina* "wine," is a borrowing; and *wairo* from *waiero* "dog's tail, hair of a dog's tail," is very unlikely to be related to water.

As convincing as this wealth of words relating *wai* to "water" may be, the situation is far from straight-forward, especially with place names. In all languages, the meanings of place names become obscure over a period of time. Thus, in Maori *waipa* may mean "the river of fortified villages," but the meanings of *waipawa* "river/town," *waikouaiti* "town," and *waiheke* "island" are far from clear (McLintock 1966). So, even though place names contain the root *wai,* their value as data is open to discussion.

More relevant to *waitoreke,* in very few cases where the phonemic pattern *wai* unambiguously means "water" is that pattern followed by the Maori dental phoneme *t* plus the back vowel *u* or *o.* In every other case where it is followed by *-to-* or *-tu-,* its meaning is related to witchcraft or religion.

Two exceptions can be cited. The first is *waitomo* "caves," where the name translates best as "water passing through a hole." Waitomo Caves are indeed a magical place:

> It is a spectacular sight to see the glow worms that live in the caves in New Zealand, the most famous being at Waitomo, about 200 miles north of Wellington. The ceilings of these caves are covered with thousands of glowing larvae, and from each is suspended a long luminescent thread that apparently serves to catch food particles or small insects. If one talks loudly, or if the wall of the cave is tapped sharply, the larvae turn off their lights virtually as one. After a brief period the lights come on again, tentatively at first and then more boldly, until the whole ceiling is once again ablaze [McElroy and Seliger 1962].

As tempting as it might be for our purposes, however, there is no evidence that any Maori ceremonies or magic took place in these caves.

The second exception is *waituhi,* which Williams lists as having several meanings. Used as a noun, it means either "a pool of water collected in a hollow tree or rock around which bird snares are set," or "a freshet, first signs of flood waters." But used as a transitive verb, it means "to perform birthrites" (see below). Used as an adjective, it means "red." These may not, however, all be the same word.

It is very likely that linguistics is becoming entangled in the Maori socio-religious complex, and to assume that all words containing *wai* relate only or primarily to "water" is thus not justified. Even a brief review of the Maori

spiritual or magical data in which *wai* is evident, makes a convincing argument: Another meaning for *wai* is "memory, recollection of words heard," detected in *paki waitara* "legends, myths, beliefs," and in *waita* "song, to sing." A considerable number of words and expressions derived from this meaning are related to the spirit world: *wairua* "spirit, shadow, soul"; *tae-a-wairua* "be there in spirit"; *hono-i-wairua* "Gathering Place of the Spirits"; and *whaka-wai(a)* "entice, beguile, (tempt)."

We know that the spirit world played a very important role in Maori society at the time of the first European contacts. Hogg (1980), in his work on cannibalism, quotes a Dr. Felix Maynard:

> There is not a bay, not a cove, in New Zealand which has not witnessed horrible dramas, and woe to the white man who falls into the New Zealander's hands. When the victor eats his foe after combat, he believes he eats not only his body but his soul. It is an outrage to eat the body; and it is an advantage to eat the *waidoua*—the soul of the vanquished—because this is then assimilated with one's own. This superstition is all-powerful in wartime.

(Dr. Maynard most likely rendered the Maori flapped *r* as an intervocalic *d*. The word should be *wairua*.)

In Maori religion and folklore, *waitokorau* was a kind of witchcraft. The personification of witchcraft was *makutu*. He dwelt with and served *miru*, the wicked goddess of the gates of death, in *tatau-o-te-po* "Door of Night." Thus, it is possible that *waitutu* "dark in color" is related to the magical "darkness of night, or death."

A Maori legend concerning two rivers seems to confuse the issue by relating water to the spirit world, but perhaps relates "water," "essence," and "spirit":

> According to the story the *waiau-uha* (Waiau) and the *waiau-toa* (Clarence) were respectively male and female spirit lovers living in the Spenser Mountains. For some reason they were transformed into rivers, the sources of which were not far apart. When warm rains melted the snows and caused floods, it was said that the parted lovers were lamenting and that the rivers were swollen with their tears [McLintock 1966].

In recent Maori, a number of words show clear relation of the *(w)aito-* morpheme with the magico-mythological concept. We can cite *aitu(-tia)* "death, misfortune," and *aitu-* "ghost," from Proto-Austronesian **hantu* (Treager 1891). (The present reconstruction is **qanitu*, but this entails no great difficulty as the *n* is thought to have dropped out [Capell 1962]. Also, the initial phoneme, **q*, may or may not appear—cf. the pronunciations of English "huge"—without disturbing the etymology.) We should also include in the witchcraft complex *waituhi* "birthrites," *waitohi* "a kind of incantation used before combat," and *waitohu* "a mark, to mark an animal, reserve for oneself, prognosticate."

As to *waitoreke* itself, Pollack (Costello 1974) points to the South Island Maori dialect variant, [k] for [ng], suggesting *waitoreke* from *waitorengi*.

Compatible examples do exist, for instance *waitaki*, the southern variant of the northern Maori place name *waitangi* "Weeping Waters." Considering our findings above, however, the meaning of *waitorengi* would not be "disappearing under the water" (an interpretation Pollack himself feels is "a little too pat"), but perhaps "disappearing ghost/spirit." The difficulty of settling on a satisfactory etymology is further increased by another variant: *waito teke* (Watson 1960).

The North/South Maori variants essentially attest to the stability of *waito-*, but, thus far, no clear solution can be presented for the etymology of *-reke*.

A further possibility arises from an etymology based on the definite or indefinite pronoun *wai* "the one who . . . ." This line of thought would yield meanings such as *wai-toreke* "one forsaken" (*toreke* "left behind, forsaken") and the North Maori *wai-torengi* "one-sinking" (NM *torengi* "sink into [as the sun into the horizon]"), or "water-sinking."

In this sense, John Colarusso (1985) has suggested the possible connection of *waitoreke* to North Maori *wai-rangi* and SM *wai-raki* "foolish, one dried up, wrinkled, a monster, a mythical animal." The term *wai-to-rehe* "one of wrinkles, skin marks" (*rehe* "wrinkles, tattoo marks over the eyebrows, wizened, stunted, puny") perhaps adds confirmation to the supposition. Both *waitoreke* and *wai-raki* "monster, mythical animal," would then be a variant of *wai-to-rehe* "one of wrinkles." We will see below that there is some evidence of the *-reke/rehe* variant.

Finally, there is the possibility that the name is not amenable to analysis. Sir Peter Buck felt (Krumbiegel 1950) that *waitoreke* was "quite ungrammatical." This pronouncement, although meaningless in linguistic terms, still carries considerable weight. Sir Peter's real name was Te Rangihiroa; he was the son of an Irishman and a Maori woman. He grew up among his mother's people, obtained his higher education in England, and eventually returned to New Zealand, where he began 25 years studying and recording the native cultures of the Polynesian Pacific (McLintock 1960). It seems prudent here, perhaps, to overlook his ignorance of modern linguistic terminology, and share his better-informed suspicion.

The Roots of *Kaureke*

Before summarizing our efforts and drawing a conclusion, we should examine briefly another name recorded for this animal. The term is *kaurehe* or *kaureke*, the latter being the spelling Mantell—who first recorded the term—used in an 1850 article. But according to Watson (1960) he changed it to *kaurehe* in an 1851 report. It is not known whether he considered the first incorrect or simply a less preferable variant of the second.

Heuvelmans (1958) suggested the possibility that a completely separate creature was involved, since sufficient discrepancies in the animal's color-

ation were described. This position is supported by Watson's (1960) data. Ley's data neither credits nor discredits this point of view.

Like *waitoreke, kaureke* supports either a water or magical interpretation of the beast. The primary meaning of *kau* is "swim, wade," but another is "ancestor," or "the name of a mythological fish hook and line." Complicating the matter is *kaua* "an extinct native bird similar to the kingfisher"—obviously found near the water. Also *kaurehe* can refer to the *tuatara* (*Sphenodon punctatus*), as well as a monster. Watson (1960) noted Duff's argument that *kaureke* is "almost certainly a printer's error for *karara ke,* meaning 'a different type of lizard' (hence tuatara)." Duff is believed to have misread "coarse grisly hair" as "coarse gristly hair," and mistaken it for the spines of a reptile. The line of reasoning is therefore spurious.

(As has recently turned out [Clark 1984], there actually was within historic times at least one other large lizard in New Zealand in addition to the tuatara. In the late 1970's, the curator of The Institute of Natural History in Marseilles requested help from the British Museum in identifying a large stuffed reptile brought from New Zealand, probably by d'Urville. Work on the 60-centimeter-long lizard by Aaron Bauer, at the University of California, Los Angeles, reveals it to be a new species of gecko, believed extinct since the middle of the last century. Some hope is held, however, that this largest known gecko—about the size of the tuatara—is still alive in some of the rugged areas of the North Island. Two other large lizards are mentioned in the Maori mythology, the *kuai* [Stack 1874, Anonymous 1898, Hutton 1898, Watson 1960] and the aforementioned *ngarara* [Stack 1874, Watson 1960]. Mostly likely the gecko will turn out to be the *ngarara.*)

Watson also points out that "The Maori certainly acknowledge a large fauna of completely mythical beasts, monsters and man-like creatures with supernatural powers, of which the *kaurehe,* some sort of man-eating dragon, was one . . . ." This naturally presents the possibility that the *kaurehe* was at one time the marine crocodile (*Crocodylus porosus*)—a perfect man-eating dragon. But it is quite difficult to imagine the term being applied to a two-foot-long furry creature that flees from man. We are perhaps etymologically safer in suggesting *kaurehe* as meaning "ancestor-wrinkled, wizened" or "water-wrinkled."

Conclusions

In summary, the following points should now be clear: 1) The roots *wai, waito, waitu* involve a panoply of meanings which includes but is not limited to "water." 2) Meanings associated with the root (*w*)*aito* relate to the spiritual, magical, or mythological world of the Maori. 3) The word may derive from the pronoun *wai* "the one who . . ."; one word (*wai-raki*) is even glossed as "monster, mythical animal." 4) No simple and satisfactory etymology

can be presented for the ending *-reke.* 5) *kaurehe* also affords alternate interpretations, relating either to "swimming" or "ancestors."

Certainly we have shown that *wai,* "water," is only one of several possible roots from which *waitoreke* could have come. But aside from returning to the mind-set of the Maoris who named the beast, it seems impossible to judge from the data whether or not this is a real or mythical animal. Among the wide range of possible meanings, a number of them would appear incompatible with the physical description of the animal. Linguistically considered, the author feels the *waitoreke* was a part of the Maori mythological fauna. This does not, it is true, accord with the fact that Europeans also saw a beast that the Maori called by this name. What the linguistic data suggests is that the name of a mythological creature was applied—perhaps mistakenly—to an animal with which the recent Maori were really as unfamiliar as the white man. The "python," named after the mythological serpent that haunted the caves of Parnassus, and the "Tasmanian devil" are both examples of old, mythological terms applied to recent animals.

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